

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* feeds on nectar

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During the dry season months of May to August, a number of the Top End's most widespread tree species flower, including the Darwin Woollybutt *Eucalyptus miniata*, the Darwin Stringybark *E. tetradonta* and the Fern-leaved Grevillea *Grevillea pteridifolia*. As these species are prolific sources of nectar much favoured by nectar-feeding birds (Franklin & Noske 1999, 2000), nectar is an abundant resource at this time of the year over a vast area (Woinarski *et al.* 2000). This seasonal resource is exploited not only by birds that normally consume nectar – honeyeaters and lorikeets – but also by a range of opportunists including frugivores, insectivores and even granivores and a terrestrial omnivore which rarely feed on nectar at other times of the year (Franklin 1999). Here I report observations of a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* feeding opportunistically at flowers and apparently obtaining nectar. Nectar has not previously been reported as a food source for this species in the Top End or elsewhere (Higgins 1999).

On 27 July 2006 at Butterfly Springs in Limmen National Park (proposed) (15°38'S, 135°28'E) in the Northern Territory's "Gulf country", I observed a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo feeding at flowers of the Fern-leaved Grevillea on three occasions. On one occasion the behaviour persisted for 15 minutes, and on the other two for at least five minutes. The bird (possibly the same individual) moved slowly from conflorescence to conflorescence, working over each for up to about a minute. When the angle of observation was suitable, I could clearly see its tongue moving rapidly in and out of the flowers, probing near the base of the style. I saw no behaviour suggesting that the bird was chewing the flowers, nor any evidence of flower parts being dropped. On one occasion the bird was noted biting off an entire conflorescence, feeding from it whilst holding it in its foot, then dropping it.

Fern-leaved Grevillea is a small tree. There were numerous specimens of it in heavy bloom in the vicinity. Examination of the conflorescences revealed an abundance of exposed nectar near the base of the style in flowers in which the style was about to open or had recently unfurled. As the pollen-presenter in *Grevillea* is at the tip of the style (Olde & Marriott 1995), which in open flowers of *G. pteridifolia* is held about 4 cm from the nectary (pers. obs.), the cockatoo was not seeking pollen.

Franklin (1999) observed 21 species of opportunists, and gleaned records of a further eight species from the literature and other sources. Amongst these were one other cockatoo, the Little Corella *Cacatua sanguinea* feeding at the flowers of a eucalypt, as well as four species of parrots other than lorikeets. As the foraging in this observation was non-destructive and brought the facial feathers into the vicinity of the pollen-presenter, it is possible that the species at least occasionally serves to pollinate Fern-leaved Grevillea. Whether cockatoos, parrots and other opportunists provide pollination services to trees in the cool dry season appears worthy of further investigation.

References

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Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* feeding at the flowers of Fern-leaved Grevillea *Grevillea pteridifolia* at Butterfly Springs. (Don Franklin)